Baltimore, 2013

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Summary

"And you?" he asks, because ultimately their discussions aren't about the cases - Hannibal was largely uninvolved in them, save his tertiary contact with Will. "Have you come to believe you deserve punishment?"

"I think every killer deserves punishment," Will replies, and there's no hesitation, but when he looks up his gaze isn't as stable and he doesn't hold it long. Perhaps that's the reason he relates to this killer so keenly, because the punishment is deserved, it's anticipated and almost goaded, but it is also feared. This is not a man who wants to die, but who knows he should.

Will Graham encounters a killer he can't shake, finding the freedom and abandon with which the kills were committed both grotesque and enviable. Hannibal offers a solution.

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There is never just one lifetime, not for people who are meant to meet. In Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter's case, they shared five. Four which they could not share fully, and one which they did. This is their last, and current one.

Notes

This is the fifth and last in a 5-part AU series depicting the lifetimes Hannibal and Will had shared but never fully lived through, and one that they're still working on (canon). We will post every Sunday for the next six weeks.

This has been an ongoing project for a few months and we are very proud of it. Some of the lifetimes connect more than others, there are mentions and clues connecting to previous 'lives' or past ones and they do flow into one another, as slowly but surely they get closer and closer to this lifetime they share now.

They will be rated per story, some ranging to explicit for violence, while others for sex. We're just gonna assume that language isn't a factor ;)

There is a hunger in Will Graham's eyes these days that Hannibal has never seen. The case is burning him from the inside out, as they always do - but where they usually start with an ember, this has blazed alive like a fire. His eyes are the evidence of the blackened edges within, dark and dangerously angled down like he feared the blaze could jump out of him as it had jumped within.

He shuts the door to his office, and watches Will hang on the edge of his desk like a vulture, and it runs against his nerves like a hand pushing abrasively against his skin, the way the killer's mind has Will casually touching things he would normally know better than to disturb.

"Tell me about the case," he says, letting irritation go. He has seen some on the news, but Will was always more wonderfully descriptive.

The sound Will aims for is a laugh, he misses the mark significantly. The case is harrowing, the killer a sadist, and the victims nothing more than rag dolls tossed away.

"It's not about control," he says finally, "Rape is usually about control but this... this is a kid with dolls that don't bend the way he wants them to, so he adjusts the limbs."

Will doesn't meet the man's eyes for a moment, turning instead to take up a heavy paperweight from the desk and fidget with it. He hasn't slept for days, the nightmares worse than before. He can feel Hannibal's irritation but for once does nothing to quell it.

"Eventually he'll run out of things to mount them on, and his ornaments won't be on display. after that I doubt we'll find him."

Hannibal lifts his eyes away so he doesn't have to see Will categorically disordering his desk in a way that suggests the rearrangement of limbs subliminally to the mind, even as he describes it.

"This is crude," he suggests, "But what about DNA results?" Surely the acts weren't sexual in nature, but there were biological aspects to fantasy killings - in cases like this. Some killers were too careful for that. "Removing the control aspect usually removes all careful planning as well."

It was escalating though, and in a way Will Graham would feel acutely. Hannibal moves across his own space as if he can't feel Will bending it into a new unwilling shape with every new item he touches, and pours the man a drink. He removes the heavy paper weight from Will's hands and passes the glass into them instead.

"His disorder is affecting you to the point where you're having difficulty thinking in straight lines?"

"I doubt I've thought in straight lines since Jack asked to borrow my imagination." Will mumbles, following the deliberate return of the paperweight with a sullen expression. "No DNA. No trace evidence. Nothing. Just bodies, six of them, impaled on..." he sucks in a long

breath between his teeth and takes a slow drink. When he licks his lips, it's more exhausted than thoughtful.

"He's a ghost with a sick obsession. And one that will be far more dangerous when he runs out of his creativity." he reaches back to run a finger over the ornate letter opener on its stand before picking that up and turning it in his hand. "There's only so much you can use against a human body to violate it."

"Such impalement has a long history," Hannibal observes, mildly as possible as Will leaves fingerprints on the metal, as he turns it thoughtfully in his hands, equal parts spear and phallus. "Nearly two thousand years before Christ, Hammurabi describes it as a method for dealing with cheating wives or captured enemy soldiers."

Will's eyes are distant and unfocused, however, and Hannibal suspects that there is something in the shining blade of the knife captivating to his mind. "Or perhaps an obsession with object penetration," Hannibal continues, sliding his hands into his pockets to resist taking the letter opener away from Will and replacing it where it belongs. "Phalluses were made from stone very early into human toolmaking, there is something of an obsession amongst humanity with penetration. In Greece they used molded bread - the olisbokollix."

He isn't certain Will is even paying attention.

It does take a moment, but the words penetrate. Will blinks, frowns, and looks up. He sets the glass down behind himself - careful to avoid any paperwork, which he notices releases some tension from Hannibal's shoulders - and passes the dagger-shaped opener to his other hand.

"Bread?" he repeats, voice low in a mixture or disbelief and mild discomfort. The knife gets turned over and over until it gets set aside also - this time on top of paperwork - and Will crosses his arms instead. "They've yet to sink that low into depravity."

He gives Hannibal a look over the frames of his glasses. They're quiet before curiosity just wins out.

"It can't have been particularly effective, can it?"

Hannibal's eyes follow as the glass goes directly on the wooden desktop, there is no ice at least so there is no chance of sweating rings into the expensive wood. Will leaves smudged fingerprints on the letter opener, and perhaps he will soon forget he ever touched it. It could be useful, should Hannibal require evidence against Will Graham in the future. He does not readjust where it has been set.

"You're considering modern bread," Hannibal answers, after some consideration, as straight faced as ever. But then he finally ventures a smile, faintly mischievous as he leads Will's mind away from its original train. "Consider something more like sourdough, or even the simplest flour, salt and water as clay."

He is waiting for the consideration to turn deeper on Will's features - for him to start to feel it perhaps, just by the very suggestion of it.

Will's brows press closer and rise just a little, his expression quite clearly reading bewildered disgust. And something else. Curiosity perhaps. He says nothing for a while, just watches the man in front of him and meditates on the pattern of his suit to keep his mind from taking the new train of thought further than face value. People used bread as phallic objects of sexual pleasure. They no longer did. Will does not need his mind offering images of potential modern applications.

"Must I consider?" he asks finally, his laugh a weak nervous thing before he lets his eyes focus on Hannibal's face once more. "Do you think the killings will take a turn into something so," his lips purse, "Wasteful? They're barely planned, not researched."

For a moment, Will is almost back. Hannibal does not obviously observe the changes drifting over his face, instead moving alongside the desk and past, to sit demonstratively in his chair and wait for Will to sit as well.

"They are already wasteful," he suggests, meeting Will's gaze. "The proposed waste of food would be secondary."

After pulling Will's attention back once more to the train of thought he had planted, he lets the matter drop. "With no plan, he will grow sloppier. His work is intended to shock - as art is supposed to, in some cases."

He thinks of Leda and the Swan, of shock art and displays for attention like Orgies of Mystery Theater, and Piss Christ, and continues to consider. "This is a performance. Your killer wants to be recognized, wants the attention. As any artist... there must be a signature."

"He will need to go through more bodies before he gets sloppier," Will replies acerbically, "The higher the count grows the better the performance. If it's meant to be impacting, he's certainly started off well."

He doesn't sit, he runs his hand over his face in a frustrated, tired gesture and pushes off Hannibal's desk to pace his office; he doesn't keep his back to the man, but be this out of politeness or an inexplicable survival instinct he's too unfocused to consider. He sighs, pressing his lips together before turning his head in the general direction of Hannibal, eyes low against the surface of the desk for the moment.

"The last crime scene disturbed me. I'm sorry I... imposed."

The pacing is familiar. Hannibal allows it, following Will's jagged pace with sedate eyes. He keeps his hands folded in his lap, leaning forward to show he is engaged. He does not keep eye contact, exactly, but follows Will with the pressure and example of his gaze while he keeps his breathing slow and clear.

"It isn't an imposition to visit," Hannibal corrects. "I am here to listen." As a friend would. Will can't help Hannibal's preferences that his desk not be rearranged. "Gather your thoughts and start again. What has brought you so close to this one?"

There had been a certain closeness with the others, but always Hannibal could draw him back easily. He had begun to see the instinct kick in for Will to bring himself back - when he was

within the office, or in Hannibal's home standing like a flickering shadow in his kitchen, ready to vanish the second Hannibal turned the light of attention on him.

Will bites his lip and holds it, the pressure gentle but present enough to pale the skin. Then he lets it go.

"There is a level of abandon in these crimes that I find freeing." he says finally, pressing his teeth to his top lip a moment, as he had to the lower, "There is no control, there is no desire, there is just..." he lets out a long breath and shakes his head, removing his glasses to rub his eyes again as he stops pacing and just breathes, just to the left of the center of the room.

"This is not rape for control, these are not kills for a purpose. It's that lack of constriction, the... creativity. I find it hard to disassociate with something I relate to so closely."

"Because you find it easy to surrender, and find yourself in a mind that surrenders easily," Hannibal turns the words around, carefully, "you find yourself reflecting in an uncomfortable way on an unpleasant surface."

He glances up at Will for confirmation, and finds the man nodding, scrubbing his face at the truth of the words. Hannibal tips his head.

"How long has it been since you've let yourself out?" He unfolds himself slowly, and has a glance at his watch. Not too early to offer. "If you are free now, I can offer you dinner. Perhaps a chance to find yourself again will help you see the image clearer?"

Will laughs again, and it's an unpleasant sound. He doesn't let himself out. He fixes boat engines and cares for his dogs, lectures at the FBI and reluctantly allows himself to be dragged to crime scenes. He shows barely a hint of what he is when he opens his mind to the killers and feeds off their energy. He will not let himself free, he knows what's behind that door.

He does, however, accept the offer of dinner - 'I'm not needed at the lab this evening, dinner would be wonderful' - and takes a moment to straighten his shoulders before returning his glasses to his face. He offers a very weak smile before it fades to the tired expression he'd worn when Hannibal had entered his office. Perhaps he just needs the distance. Good company and even better food, a good night's rest - laughable - and clearer eyes for what the morning will bring. Will pushes his hands into his pockets and waits for Hannibal to escort him from his office, returning his control to his space, as Will had so rudely entered it without the man's consent earlier.

Hannibal reclaims the glass from his desk, and has a sip himself, before he returns it, upside-down to the tray hidden in the far corner, neatly behind a bookshelf where it might be ornamental, but where he keeps such things. Then he leads the way from his office.

Taking mental stock of what he has, Hannibal holds back a smile as they exit, and he locks the door behind them, as they crunch over the gravel and he invites Will to settle into the passenger seat of his car instead of having to drive separate, both so he can relax and soothe with the motion of the vehicle, the constantly changing sights, and because he does not believe Will should be without company.

He has enough to make a proper Amatricana sauce or perhaps Bolognese if he could thaw liver fast enough without destroying the texture. Pasta was a fine accompaniment for a crusty, thick bread. A joke in poor taste, perhaps, but he could play innocent until Will was guessing about Hannibal's motives rather than the killer's - just for a night or two.

It was good to remind Will, now and again, which mind he should be most engaged with.

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There's an unmistakable beauty in watching Hannibal prepare a meal. He falls into a completely different rhythm than he maintains throughout the day during his normal interactions. It's not slower so much as smoother and more graceful. He moves in a way that's almost sensual. Will licks his top lip into his mouth and wonders just how far he's allowed himself into the mind of this killer to notice such things.

He doesn't offer to help prepare the meal.

Hannibal talks as he works, casually enough to not require Will to reply, though on occasion he hums his agreement or offers an opinion. Overall it's a quiet affair, and Will's shoulders lower as he allows himself to relax. It's only when Hannibal sets their places, and takes up a heavy knife to slice the bread for them that Will's mind returns to the passing comment in the office.

His eyes narrow a little, just enough to notice if anyone paid attention, and he sighs out a long breath through his nose.

"Do you think they did it for the simplicity?" he asks, gesturing with his chin lightly when Hannibal glances up and cants his head at the question. "The, uh, olisbokollix."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows in answer and considers the question. It wasn't quite the one he expected. "Perhaps of available materials it was the best suited. The commonly held belief was that penetration was required for female enjoyment," Hannibal says, making another neat, oblique slice. "Apparently they didn't care to consult them on the matter."

The latter is in a faintly wry tone, perhaps the closest to outright suggestive that Hannibal has allowed of himself. "I suppose because they knew bread was safe to put in the body. Faintly misguided, but it shows more self awareness than you might expect."

It's rewarding to know he can pull Will's thoughts along as easy as this, simply by continuing the thread of thought. He passes three of the cut pieces to Will. He adds, as tamely as if it was an unrelated thought, an afterthought, placing the words ever so carefully after a pause and another few cuts. "I have another loaf I can send home with you, if you'd like."

Will raises his eyes slowly and sets them on Hannibal, taking in the amusement that writes itself on the man’s face subtly – no smile, not even an outward narrowing of eyes, but something that suggests this is in jest – before he feels his jaw twitch, just once.

“I thought the problem was my being too close to the case, Dr. Lecter,” Will says finally, tone carefully matched to Hannibal’s, “Not my need to get closer.” He keeps his eyes on the man

long enough for the sensation to become uncomfortable, he rarely keeps eye contact with anyone else, before turning them instead to the meal in front of him.

“But I will consider.”

When he takes up the glass of wine, it’s to sip slowly, take his time and enjoy the flavor. He knows Hannibal is still watching him, can feel the tendrils of something more than dry humor seek to penetrate his concentration and doesn’t let them through.

Though Hannibal could argue in this case that Will would likely be understanding the killer by understanding the victim - at least in some extremely roundabout way, he instead accepts the statement as delivered. It might serve Hannibal right to have it turned around on himself, but it had also served at least in a minor regard to stabilize Will's thoughts.

The addition - that Will would consider - sits like an unanswered question as Hannibal settles to eat. Which part was he considering, the overt offer that had disguised the subtle one that Hannibal felt as if he were always putting forward? He doubts Will had finally grasped it, instead believing the man was hiding behind humor.

"It's rare to see you escape again, once you've found a space for your mind to occupy," he observes. "I think distraction might serve to help you keep yourself, though I doubt Jack would wholly approve."

Will chuckles, chewing his dinner with relish before licking his lips and offering a quiet reply.

“Jack rarely approves of anything,” Will takes up his glass again, “Wholly or otherwise. If I were to live solely by his approval he would not have me sleep unless it was part of the killer’s pattern.”

It comes out more bitter than Will intends but he doesn’t take it back. He’s found it to be easier to not lie to Hannibal, too much energy went into making himself clear if the man sees through the initial lie. But the dinner is a much needed escape, this Will does not refute.

“My mind finds a way to keep itself,” he continues after a pause, “Perhaps in a misguided need for self-preservation. I cannot afford a distraction while the case runs, but I may take you up on another offer of dinner once it’s closed.”

It’s an implication in jest as much as it is serious. Will does not want to intrude, to impose his company on the man in front of him, but he’s certain the offer will be made again.

"And if I should offer again before it's closed," Hannibal starts, winding angelhair around his fork under the thick red Bolognese sauce, gathering meat between the strands of pasta. "You would be so rude as to refuse?"

The tone is amused, flat. Will has refused his offers before - on the insistence he would be bad company, that he had other work to do, that he should be going home to his dogs. It's still unclear exactly what he was refusing every time - company certainly, and Hannibal knows

his is not difficult to endure. The specific sort of company is the question, after the implied introduction of more carnal topics to their conversation.

When he looks up, Will is eating, oblivious to anything but the question on the surface. Hannibal resists the urge to sigh. William, for all he claimed to reach out and understand others inherently, to have a sort of magnification of what the human condition was, was blissfully ignorant in some very basic areas of what it was in being human. There are points when Hannibal wonders if he is truly asexual, and then points when he sees the man romancing Alana Bloom, in moments he reminds himself he has no right to be jealous of.

Will doesn't reply, simply allows himself to enjoy the dinner and the quiet, welcome company. He's certain that the killings will increase, that they will grow crueler and more creative and his mind will be welcome anywhere but at a civilized dinner. That's why he has refused so many other offers, careful to keep his strangely unfocused mind away from people he finds interesting. Even people he had claimed, not six months ago, to not find interesting at all. His lips quirk. He doesn't mention it.

"You've excused my rudeness before," he says eventually, "Why would this case be any different?"

There is a hint of apology in his tone, however, a precursor to a rejection were Hannibal to inevitably make the offer of dinner again. In truth, Will is scared that the more of himself he allows to be seen, the less Hannibal will wish to see. There is a reason Will has so few friends, those he has he keeps ignorant of the worst of himself.

Hannibal allows the answer - evasive as it is, but he doesn't let it pass wholly unchallenged. He sets his fork aside on the edge of his plate, tines down, and looks up, the picture of honesty. "Because your reactions to this case worry me more."

It was true - here was Will, clear as day, but the man who had entered his office and fidgeted at Hannibal's desk had been on the verge of someone else. Perhaps he could simply say it was to spare his desk further accosting, but it would not be wholly true. He also saw an opportunity to find something he doesn't usually in William - assertive lust.

That he should have to resort to that sort of low when considering his tactics for getting William malleable in his hands should suggest something seriously wrong either with William or with his tactics, if Hannibal was not certain that they both needed the excuse. The chance to say, afterward, that they weren't themselves, on the off chance that it didn't work out. It was unlikely to work out.

But he lets it lay for the remainder of dinner, and instead of pressing the issue, packs Will a basket to go, layering separate containers of pasta and sauce, of bruschetta and mussels for later over top of two suggestively sized lengths of bread, carefully wrapped in clear plastic, but not visible until Will gets home and unpacks it.

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There has never been a day on this job where Will has been happy to say 'I was right'. Occasionally his mind offers up enough of a lead for the FBI to find who they need, in those

instances, Will allows, being right had its advantages. But more often than not, Will's predictions for further violence and crueler kills turn out to be fulfilled. And it's then that he seeks out the sanctuary of Hannibal's office, the quiet room with high ceilings and an impossible number of books. It calms him, grounds him, and reminds him that somewhere underneath the killer veil he wears, there is the veil of normalcy.

When Hannibal enters this time, the frown evident immediately at having his space violated - he soothes it over quickly, but Will sees - Will is sitting in his chair, hands restless with the paperweight he had played with not days before.

"He kills in pairs now." he informs him, head tilted in a way that does not suggest Will's usual movements. Jack hasn't allowed him rest beyond what he himself takes, and Jack rarely sleeps when cases accelerate, and Will's mind hasn't been allowed to recalibrate. "One isn't enough anymore."

Hannibal repeats the routine - he rouses himself from his seat by the window, where he had been studying his tablet. Ostensibly reading the news, but in reality he had alternated with rounds of Angry Birds. He sets the device aside. His evening appointment had cancelled, and he could have left the office early, but he tended these days to stay the full of his office hours. Partially, out of professionalism. Mostly, because William tended to instinctively come here, rather than Hannibal's house.

"What kind of pairs?" Hannibal prompts, standing to begin the ritual. Will is fussing with his paperweight again, so Hannibal pours him another drink - two sips this time, perhaps. Enough to fortify, enough to allow him to ask for more rather than leave good scotch undrunk. "Identical, matched, or simply he kills in twos because he feels the need to accelerate, as most killers eventually do?"

If so then perhaps the theory of shock art for attention could be discarded. A shame, it could have led some interesting places. He extends the drink to Will, so that the other has no choice but to set the paperweight aside and take the drink. An action that was Will's, and not the killer's. External stimulus.

Will shrugs, a graceless gesture but a natural one, and downs the scotch in one, drawing his lips back in a silent hiss after as the alcohol burns his throat and warms him.

"There seems to be no connection beyond the violation itself. Perhaps his sadism hungers for more attention." Will shakes his head slowly, tapping his finger against the rim of his glass in a distracted way. "He doesn't get off on their pain so much as the attention. It's possible he's distorting. More likely he's projecting."

Will flicks his eyes up and his tone slides into a sneer, "He'd be quite a study. Freud would have a field day, I suppose." then he closes his eyes and lets his jaw work before swallowing and opening them again. He's lapsed out of himself more and more the less sleep he gets. Will bites the inside of his top lip before letting it go and setting the glass on the desk.

"He's enacting certain desires, with these kills. Most likely he doesn't want the pain, or even the penetration, so much as the attention."

It's a lot to consider, like William taking his drink with barely a pause this time. He was slipping deeper, and he well knew it. He wouldn't have been here if he didn't want to drag himself back up out, if even for a few moments.

"Which desires?" Hannibal wonders. "Does he desire these things done to himself, by some extension? If it was only attention, he had it without accelerating."

Watching Will's mouth work, the way it turns against his own skin, Hannibal thinks they both know the answer. This was an extreme form of self-punishment, a display of what the killer believed he deserved, was attempting to drive others to give him by his acts. The desire for penitence, somehow.

Hannibal leans one hand on the desk, edging through proximity into Will's space - technically his own, as Will seeks his own form of attention by rearranging Hannibal's system. He tries not to let his eyes fall on the scalpel on the drafting table.

Will shakes his head, just a brief jerk to one side before he slowly returns to staring at the glass in his hand. His eyes slip out of focus for a moment, the question bringing forth ideas Will has been too exhausted to consider before, or too confused to piece together properly.

"They're not desires." he amends after a significant pause, amending, he doesn't notice Hannibal standing closer, when he blinks he's not seeing the room in front of him, "The attention is conditioning, he's used to getting it. The trigger to accelerate is likely losing the attention he had had before."

It's the worst kind of abuse, attention given when it isn't something someone seeks, and after a while the drip feed of it is no longer enough.

Will presses his hand against his mouth in thought and lets out a slow, long breath through his nose.

"He believes he deserves it," he says finally, dropping his head back and letting his eyes close as his throat works to swallow, "Everything he does, he believes he deserves done to himself. But it is not a desire for it, it's terror that he'll get it."

Terror could drive any man to extremes, but an extreme man in terror... well, the results played themselves out in black and white headlines screaming guts and depravity. Color photos added gritty detail, on Tattlecrime - Ms. Lounds had been busy, and lusty in her own way in her pursuit of this case.

Hannibal settles himself on the edge of the desk, next to will, side to side, so he can follow the man's gaze from almost the same angle. He'll never understand people as well as Will Graham does, a blessing that makes his unique condition a fascination instead of a fear.

"And you?" he asks, because ultimately their discussions aren't about the cases - Hannibal was largely uninvolved in them, save his tertiary contact with Will. "Have you come to believe you deserve punishment?"

"I think every killer deserves punishment," Will replies, and there's no hesitation, but when he looks up his gaze isn't as stable and he doesn't hold it long. Perhaps that's the reason he relates to this killer so keenly, because the punishment is deserved, it's anticipated and almost goaded, but it is also feared. This is not a man who wants to die, but who knows he should.

"Who would I be if I considered myself exempt?" this is quieter, but he does smile. Another head shake, another tired gesture to rub his eyes under his glasses before resettling them and biting his top lip. He has been so many killers in so short a time that if Will were to choose his punishment he would be spoiled for choice. For himself, for his own kill, he can't name a price. It had happened too fast, and the repercussions still haunted him; as both hallucinations and a living breathing human being.

Abigail refused Will's offers of friendship as surely as he presented them, and yet never once did she ask him to stop. Perhaps that was his punishment, to see his efforts wasted.

"You don't think you are punished enough, case after case?" Hannibal sighs softly, and takes up Will's empty glass to refill it. This will have to be handled carefully, it will go better with alcohol. "It is the self punishment that most concerns me about how you identify with this case, Will."

But what if he was given what the killer desired - if even to make his fear of it stop. What if Will had the punishment, in a way... it was perhaps worth the attempt. It was at least worth another glass of whiskey, another carefully prepared dinner.

"Or perhaps because the punishment you put yourself through is of a different nature, it suddenly loses fulfilment," Hannibal suggests gently, and he presses the glass back into Will's hands, fuller this time.

"I don't need punishment to feel fulfilled." Will returns, slightly harder than he supposes Hannibal deserves. He sighs and looks up in apology before letting his eyes drift to the liquid in the glass in his hand. "Though perhaps because this killer does, I can't get the thought of it out of my head."

He drinks slowly, not savoring it so much as allowing the burn to spread slowly from his tongue down his throat and further. He leaves just enough to cover the bottom of the glass and licks his lips slowly in contemplation.

"Circumstantially, I would say Jack puts me through punishment," Will says after a while, slightly distant, but when he looks up this time he holds the gaze, "Do you think that's what I'm doing? Punishing myself for Garrett Jacob Hobbs?"

"But you've had the opportunity to remove yourself, and yet you bow your head and walk back into the case every time Jack crooks his fingers," Hannibal says, watching him drink. Will's eyes grow darker, his attention slides slower when he is not quite drunk. But it makes him bolder, too, as it did everybody.

He settles back against the desk again, reaching back across it to resettle the things Will had touched into their prior positions. The letter opener is noticeably absent.

When he shifts back to the position of their discussion, his hand finds a place low on Will's side, and for a second the touch is almost soft before it turns to a hard pinch to catch his awareness, to spark pain. "This is the punishment the killer craves - his acts, his art you could say with extreme allowances, are physical."

Penetrative, in fact.

"Yours are different enough to hold you separate," Hannibal observes, as if that were a good answer, the desired answer. But what he means is that it has been too long since Will has felt anything physical, perhaps the lack of personal input was affecting his ability to understand the case.

"Not separate enough, it seems." Will murmurs, considering the rest of his glass before gently tipping it to finish. There is something visceral in the kills, beyond the displays, the grotesque parody of intimacy and fantasy, something primal and familiar that sits just on the edge of Will's mind and pesters him to understand it. His side throbs gently with the memory of pain and he finds himself almost unconsciously tonguing his lower lip as though one motion would undo the other.

"How can I, at once, understand someone so well and find myself completely unable to relate?" he asks. The glass is grasped in both hands now, resting between his knees as his back bows in a semblance of a relaxed pose. It takes him a moment to look up.

"I feel as though I should understand better." he says, "That there is a barrier between him and I that I can touch and push against but not break down."

Perhaps some form of self-preservation, evident at last. Hannibal keeps the observation to himself.

"Do you really want to break it down? As you said, your mind has a way of holding itself."

Hannibal takes the glass, when Will is done with it, and returns it to the cart, tipped upside down.

"Is this the part where you refuse dinner?"

Will’s smile is a simple thing, barely there and tired.

“Is this the part where you offer?” he asks in return. It’s too early for dinner, unless he’s somehow lost time and it’s no longer afternoon. He doesn’t answer in regards to the actual question, too preoccupied in trying simultaneously to distance himself and sink deeper into the psyche of the man doing this.

The scotch spreads warm in his chest and makes his eyes close in a pleased, sleepy way. He waits, takes a deep breath and makes to stand.

“I need to break it down to catch him, regardless of what my mind wants.”

"Need to, or want to?" Hannibal asks for clarification, and he beckons Will along, after a brief glance at the time. It is too early for dinner, but nearing the end of his official office

hours. A sudden decision leaves Hannibal finished with toying at this, and though he suspects his office would serve, there was not enough privacy, and he would rather not dirty it.

"You want to catch him," Hannibal continues, as he leads the way out to his car. No invitation had been extended for Will to refuse. "You might even argue that you need to, but so long as he is caught, it does not need to be you."

He locks the office door behind them.

Will follows, noting the deliberate gesture of locking the office, the brisk pace with which Hannibal leads him to his car and unlocks the door. There is no chance to say no, so he doesn't. Just follows as he's led, his hands in his pockets and head bowed.

He thinks of how Jack pushed him into this initially, demanding to use his mind as no other would suffice. It will need to be him regardless, he can lie to himself but in the end he knows that the man will only be caught if Will allows himself deeper, lets his mind seep into the killer's and absorb everything it has to offer.

"It always needs to be me." he murmurs, sitting in the passenger seat and reclining back as Hannibal walks around the car to get behind the wheel.

The drive takes enough time for Will to relax in his seat, eyes nearly closed as he lets himself doze. He blinks when the familiar house comes into view and sighs, pulling off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"It's too early for dinner." He comments.

"Come in anyway," Hannibal suggests, mildly. It wasn't as if protest would take Will back to the office and his car. Inside, his routine is one that Will has witnessed often. His keys go on a peg on the inside of the closet door, his coat into the closet itself. He disappears upstairs to rid himself of his suit coat and returns on sock feet, moving silently as he usually did, and rolling his sleeves up.

"You must break down your wall as he would break his," Hannibal suggests, enigmatically, as he catches Will in the dining room, touching the fresh growing and green herbs in their pots held close to the wall. He is shifting the leaves, releasing the faint spiciness of their oils into the air. Sensory input. "What would do that?"

Hannibal moves silent and liquid behind Will, not quite close enough to touch yet, and wonders if he will fight or if he will understand.

Will doesn't quite startle at the words, having not heard the man come in, but he pauses in his exploration for a moment. He thinks the words over as he severs a sprig of rosemary between his thumbnail and the pad of his forefinger. A herb associated closely with memory. He rolls the leaves between his fingers until the sharp smell is strong enough to trigger. He licks his lips and turns.

"He enacts his worst fear while simultaneously wanting to escape it." he says. He sets the herb into his pocket and looks up. there is intent in Hannibal's eyes that slightly outweighs

his conventional desire to help. There's something darker there. Will's eyelids flicker as though to blink and he swallows.

"Confronting it would shatter the illusion, bring the fantasy into being."

"So you're running against the question of illusion versus reality, or is there something else you can't quite grasp?" The smell of crushed rosemary is sharp and strong in the air.

"For all your empathy you still rely on things that you have personally experienced to relate," Hannibal continues. "There are depths you can't scrape, though most killers aren't terribly interesting when you get down to it."

Will frowns and tilts his head a little in thought. "Perhaps this situation is one for which I should be glad to not have personal experience." He murmurs at length. "The illusions I work with are vivid enough."

"Confront them," Hannibal offers, and his presence seems to shift closer though he doesn't move, though his hands are still in his pockets. He pauses and turns his head away to break the eye contact. "As you said, it is too early for dinner."

Will's brows draw together a moment before his expression relaxes. The suggestion is an interesting one, the chance to experience a downfall of someone whose mind has been elusive. To bring himself to his knees in order to see the killer do the same. Unconventional therapy techniques but Hannibal has never been one for banality.

Will blinks.

"In this case, I would need to be confronted by them." He says.

Hannibal hums an affirmative, casual as that, inviting Will Graham to lay his life down into Hannibal's hands like a trust fall exercise. He lets it sit as if it were a perfectly reasonable thing, leading by example.

"It's safe to assume the killer is male, since the vast percentage of serial killers are," Hannibal continues, and he passes through the open archway into the kitchen, relieved that Will at last was at least following his line of suggestion rather than ducking beneath it repeatedly like an ever lowering limbo bar. "That simplifies things for us."

Hannibal suspects the killer has a deep fear of something to do with his own sexuality. Perhaps a traumatic experience in the past, coupled with a biological longing twisted and warped now so that there is the combination of a fear of pain and penetration and a desire for it. Perhaps it had been the only stable thing he'd known in life for a time, agony. And Society to constantly remind him that one should never, ever desire pain.

"Did you want another drink?" he asks, when Will lingers in the dining room, waiting perhaps for a verbal command.

Will just waits, listening to Hannibal move through his space, command it, offer his voice back behind him without raising it. He closes his eyes and breathes in the rosemary, lets it

settle his senses, feels the pendulum swing…

“No.” he answers finally. The pleasant buzz soothes some of the hesitation down to nothing, but more will disorient him. When he opens his eyes it’s a strange duality, the motions are his but aren’t on his behalf. He takes the steps necessary to enter the kitchen and keeps his eyes on Hannibal as he moves to stand against the island that divides the space.

Whether the feeling of nervous anticipation is his own of in the mind he’s entered is unclear, but it’s there, speeding his heart and warming his blood.

In the space of an eyeblink, Will's eyes change. From tired and frustrated to wary and calculating. It is as if he's adding up how much pain is coming his way, trying to find a tally he would allow to be acceptable before he cried stop.

Hannibal considers his options. He doesn't know the full details of the case - they are usually unprinted, and William has been unwilling to discuss the details of this one, perhaps because he could not bring to light the full extent of the motives behind them.

Pouring himself a glass of wine, Hannibal has a long, considering sip - he is savoring this, though he looks serious. "Does he tie them, William?"

Will tilts his head as though considering. His wrists itch with a phantom burn of rope and he flexes his fingers before resting his palms flat against the island-top.

“Only if they struggle.” And they always seemed to. Few of the victims had no evidence of being restrained. Zeller claimed those had been drugged with something, but no evidence had ever been found of that either, perhaps a naturally-occurring hormone.

“I think for him it’s about the act itself. Its display.” Will bites the inside of his lip gently before pushing back from the counter, gesturing in a slow deliberate way that spoke counter to his usual quick jerking motions when distressed.

Conducting his own symphony, watching it unfold.

“Fear is paralyzing, he wouldn’t need to be restrained. He is so terrified of retribution that he would still for it.”

"He certainly isn't paralyzed now," Hannibal observes. "He lashes out in fear."

But Hannibal allows it. The prospect of tying Will was appealing - but it's possible they could get there, once the door was open. He sips again, and then sets the glass aside.

"But if he knows it’s coming," Hannibal says, moving forward across the space with his hands by his sides, his intent unclear except by context "Perhaps there is such anticipation that it would be almost a relief."

He presses a palm against Will's back between the shoulders, pinning him lightly and by only the extreme of this contact against the island of counter in the kitchen.

Will moves, hands pressing against the counter again, shoulders rolling up to frame the hand holding him down. It would be a relief, were his end to come as he had bidden it. With the police he would struggle, perhaps die in the attempt. The knowledge makes Will's lips draw back in a quick baring of teeth.

"Almost." It's clipped, the intake of breath that follows a slow and deliberate thing.

He reaches up and draws his glasses off, setting them on the counter under his fingers before pushing them further away and letting them go. Perhaps if the end that's wanted cannot be granted, Will can save himself the pain of reliving it wrong twice. He makes a quiet sound but doesn't otherwise move.

There is a moment of unreality as Hannibal realizes that by the proxy of Will Graham he is pinning a vicious competitor against the counter of his kitchen. The difference is that Hannibal can keep track of who is who. Were it the killer, Hannibal might be tempted to take him through this, but he would not be involved.

Will Graham is unlikely to end up in pieces at the end of this, also - at least physically. Not today.

"If you feel this goes beyond the bounds of the exercise," Hannibal suggests, as calmly as if this were a normal, regular thing to do. As if they were at his office, trying some new form of word association. But it's almost - just this side of a challenge. Just enough to rub Will Graham - however much of him is left in there - exactly the wrong way. "You may call it off."

He pushes more firmly, until Will surrenders at the elbows, and his chest is pressed against the counter, and then makes a faint adjustment, hooking his hands together like stirrups and looping them against Will's thighs to lift him further onto it, until he's laid out like he might were he about to part the man into components for a meal, robbed of all but the barest toe-hold on the floor.

Will should call it off now. It's frightening to sink so far into someone's mind with another person present. There's a reason Jack obliges and allows Will to have his own space when he lets the pendulum swing. But he Hannibal is right in that breaking down this wall between his mind and the killer's won't damage him. his own mind finds a way to resurface, to bring Will back to himself.

So far.

And they need to catch him, the body count has escalated. Whatever trigger was driving the man, it's slipped further under his skin.

"I need personal things to relate." Will replies, deadpan. As often as he hates being right about his work, he dislikes it more when Hannibal is about him. he has not yet developed a taste for therapy. And he does not enjoy being psychoanalyzed, even by a friend. "This already goes beyond the bounds of any exercise."

Hannibal leans the full weight of his body over Will's back then, his breaths calm and slow for all he was about to disassemble two men for the price of one. The motion should be

intimate but it isn't, it's about the control of his body through leverage and weight. It's about the advantage.

"You aren't incorrect," he agrees, but he wonders exactly what Will believes he has signed up for. That he is laying out on the counter in Hannibal's kitchen - a dangerous suggestion to make to the undistracted mind of Will Graham, but his mind is already on that of another killer - suggests he knows some of what might be coming.

He'd never so much as questioned Hannibal. It's a small victory, but he feels it profoundly. "Walk me through it?" He asks, because he does not know the details, and because it is intoxicating to hear Will Graham's voice spill out the layers of depravity in his tone of supreme understanding and yet still retaining enough loathing to cast judgment with observation. "He takes them into his power, and then?"

Will lets out a slow breath through his nose and finds himself unable to fill his lungs quite as much with the next inhale. The pressure against his back is unmistakeable, heavy and warm and real and the power the posture exudes is intoxicating. He can smell the residual scent of the herb he'd ground between his fingers.

The killer wants this, craves it, this much Will knows. He runs from the pain as much as he seeks it, coaxes it closer, like a man climbing the cliff face higher and higher until he reaches the summit, simply to toss himself off and feel the air against his body for those precious few seconds longer.

This is what Will cannot understand. He understands the killing, the sheer joy the man gets from causing someone pain, from joining his body with theirs for just a moment, for as long as he can. It's a strangely intimate affair, though no DNA has ever been found on the bodies, the objects he uses to penetrate are inanimate, avatars, mirrors of himself.

When Will closes his eyes, seeking an answer, the pendulum swings but not far enough.

He cannot see him enough to know, this is the wall he hits, the wall he has hit for weeks. He makes another sound, though this is softer.

"Then he finds something worthy of being their destruction." He says quietly. he swallows, turns his head just a little more and sets his jaw. He can't keep this duality up for long, he cannot be two people at once, it's too difficult to sustain. "Something that pleases him, something he sees as an extension of himself that he can join with them in the only closeness he can understand."

Hannibal makes a distant, thoughtful noise, taking the information in. Considering. He obviously won't be taking it to the extremes the killer does, but in order to truly help - if something Hannibal is going to take so much pleasure in can be counted as such - it will have to be an ordeal.

"Does he show them?" Hannibal asks, one last press against Will's back telling him to be still and stay there, before Hannibal straightens, drawing his hand in a straight line down Will's spine before he moves away, checking to be sure his sleeves will stay up. "I suppose in this situation, he wouldn't get to choose, but does he blind them?"

A strange mirror. The killer would be prepared for this, but Hannibal is not in that man's place in this scenario. He retrieves what he needs - some is already in his pocket from when he'd ventured upstairs to leave his suit coat and shoes and the links for his cuffs. He has a few options, but he knows already what he wants.

Will's brows furrow a little further but he keeps his eyes closed. Many rapists force their victims to watch, to see them for who they are and to know that they were the ones that had done this to them. Those are usually not left alive. Those that are…

"No one has come forth as a survivor, he would have no reason to blind them." He says finally. He stays as he is, the phantom pressure still forcing him down. He has never had to voice his thought process before. When he relives a murder he narrates it, lets his mind sink to the depths of the mind he's in and commits his findings to memory. But here…

Here he needs to break the wall, see in as well as out, to understand. He needs not only the motive behind this but the process, the fear that he can feel pulse through his veins of what's happening, the needy anticipation… but he can't separate, can't set aside his own pulse from the killer's, can't determine if the mind that's roiling with possibilities and outcomes is his own or not.

"I can't be both," he murmurs finally, opening his eyes enough to see, but he doesn't move still, "I need the divide of separation, I can only approach this with one mind."

He purses his lips with a sigh before lifting his head and drawing his arms back towards himself so he can look up.

"I can't determine if it is beneficial for me to submerge myself into a mind I can't fully read or to stay as I am."

Hannibal would prefer elegance, but he makes do with availability, with simplicity. He finds a clean, thick, decorative napkin. Overlarge, the kind that allows itself to be folded into any number of configurations for table setting. It isn't a silk blindfold, but it will do. Hannibal works it in his hands.

"As you are, you haven't broken the wall," Hannibal suggests, and then he pushes Will down flat again, hand on his shoulders. He does not tie the blindfold onto his head, but he lays it flat over anyway, to block the light, to give him a darkness. It's as much for the killer as Will Graham - removing the distraction of some of Will's awareness. He leans over Will again, and suggests, "Submerge."

It was safe enough for Will, anyway, though Hannibal knows he will utterly lose track of that, and he waits until he can feel the tremors of fear convulsing in low shudders through his muscles, the heart hammering so hard he can feel it through muscles and ribs, his breaths ragged enough to stir the cloth over his head.

Then he strips the man's pants from him.

It's a paralytic, always has been. When Will is himself, the fear is a drip-feed, constant and nauseating, but he can move within it. he shifts in its confines when he slips on the mask of

another, but rarely does he move from where Jack leaves him. when he returns, the most Will has done is lift an arm or turn his body to face another way; he doesn't change position, doesn't enact the kill so much as walk himself through it.

The amount of fear he deals with renders him powerless.

And it's consuming here, stifling as the cloth over his head is, but Will has let the pendulum swing complete, and he couldn't shake it off if he tried. Not until he knows, understands this motive, this desire for reciprocation.

In his mind he has waited so long for this that it is a relief, as Hannibal had suggested, a well-deserved prize to claim. He wonders what he has earned, what implement he has deserved. He can't see who it is that's taking revenge but he knows it's coming, and something about how deft the hands are, how coordinated and careful, suggests experience he can relate to.

Takes one killer to know another.

Will supposes that's what the murderer expects, knowing what the world knows about Will Graham, the man who thinks about killing people for a living, that he will be ended by the man who had penetrated his mind.

Hannibal doesn't bother with Will's shirt, he simply pushes it up out of the way, and leaves Will bare and gasping on his counter, ribs heaving. The only real shame in this was that he couldn't see the man's eyes change into it, couldn't' see them grow wide and dark with fear - a close enough substitute for lust.

In this case, one and the same. Hannibal is still practical about this. The real killer would get no mercy from him, he would get as good as he gave to others. But this is a proxy, a falsehood that allows him to enact on Will Graham something utterly different - just close enough to give him what he needs. Not enough to do any genuine harm. The gloves are habitual, the lubricant necessary, and his suppositions - that Will had never ventured this, though perhaps the killer was familiar - are correct.

There is no foreplay. Hannibal pushes his weight down with one hand at the center of Will's back, and starts with one slick finger, enough to take the danger out of this. He knows he can't tease too long, but even for the sake of this he won't be so rushed as to injure the man.

Will hisses but stays down, mind erupting in a flurry of possibilities. He wouldn't ask for mercy, he never offered it himself, he wouldn't ask why now, why here, why it will go the way it will, because he knows that. He's begged for it since he started, since he'd left the girl impaled in the park, head back and mouth open around the pole, eyes dead and wide and matte.

He allows the memories to seep in, of such an act before, of the pain it entailed, the pleasure it was lined with. A sharp twist of fingers brings him back to the present and the memory shakes apart to nothing. Distantly, Will is aware, knows he isn't getting what he needs to filter thoroughly into the mind he's seeking. He pushes back just enough to bring a small sound out of him.

“I was running out of ideas, I didn’t think I’d need to get to six,” his voice is weaker, Will’s usual slow articulation missing in favor of a breathless, quick tone, words pushed from his lungs with the air, a desperate need to confess before the air ran out.

The running train of thought comes aloud, alive, and Hannibal watches Will reach up to grip the opposite edge of the counter. He withdraws his fingers, and then comes the real stretch - a blunt, taper that widens slowly. It's not quite yielding, but not as hard as stone or steel or plastic.

"You were careful in spite of that," Hannibal prompts, and it's slick, growing larger as he pushes, and seems like it must go on forever - the slide is so slow, the texture muffled beneath latex, that it's difficult to tell. It's easy to believe that it will keep going, keep stretching, until it truly has impaled him.

The killer had to make them believe he didn't want to be caught, for some reason - that he didn't want this. "It was almost a convincing overture." The pressure still doesn't let up, more and more and deeper, enough to ramp up his worry.

It hurts, despite the patience and attempt at gentleness, and when Will cries out it’s not with his voice. It’s constant, a mantra of sorts, the slow beat of I deserve this, I deserve this, I deserve this matching the hammering in Will’s chest. It’s difficult to breathe. And he knows, suddenly, that he will come here on his own, that he will walk himself to his own funeral because…

It takes one killer to know another.

The attention he craves, the desire for pain, retribution, understanding… he can only get that from Will, the only person who sees as he sees, and feels everything. He had killed six, because for the first three, Will had not been there to see. He killed more, because Will had seen but not observed, not understood. And no one else had been worthy of the spectacle. Of the overture.

“Stop, stop!” he blinks, eyes adjusting to the dim light barely seeping through the weave of the cloth over his head. His breathing quickens, sounds of pain escaping him with no ounce of pleasure now. Will doesn’t seek forgiveness through pain, and the reality of the situation is making his head spin the further his mind returns to itself.

As it always has.

So far.

Understanding came so soon. But Hannibal had promised Will could cry stop, and here was the end of the exercise, as he had suggested.

Hannibal shifts his restraining hand higher on Will's back, pressing between his shoulders again, but he stops when Will's voice changes pitch and becomes his own, shifts his grip and begins the slow process of withdrawing, but it is eased some by whatever preparations he had made. It still feels like nearly forever, and Hannibal shushes apologetically at the whimpers, but it frees easier than it had gone in. And then it's gone, Will is left empty save for the

condom Hannibal draws out after, a layer he'd left slick on the inside of easing the withdrawal.

He inverts his rubber glove over the spent prophylactic, then the other. They go into the stainless trashcan, but he does not yet let Will up. Not until he's returned the man's pants to him, worked them back over his hips to give him privacy again, though likely the other will want to go and wash as quickly as possible.

Hannibal is wordless, keeps his hand steadying on Will's back for just a few breaths more, and then pulls the napkin back, settles it over his shoulder as one might any dish cloth, and withdraws his touch from Will entirely at last. "You'll want the bathroom upstairs," is what he says on the matter, and moves to wash his hands at the sink, scrubbing like a surgeon to the elbows.

Whatever he had used does not appear to be in evidence.

Will curls his shoulders when they're released, and feels his body tremble, overwhelmed. He has never employed other senses to help extend his empathy, and now he has the sharp sting of rosemary in his nose and the ache he's certain will have him limping for days, both ingrained, complete association. Own personal repertoire of experience.

He only uncurls when he hears the water run in the sink, a different smell – softer, clean – wafting to him in the barest hint. He swallows and draws a hand, splayed, through his hair to push it back.

"I may need to play bait," he murmurs. A lure. His fingers twitch gently at the association and his laugh is a harsh but genuinely amused thing. "One type of mind attracts its own kind, it seems. My… unique vision… garners me some unpleasant attention."

When he pushes from the counter, it's with a hiss. He knows there's a bathroom downstairs, though the offer of the private one the floor above is noted. He rubs his face and reaches for his glasses carefully, his hands shake a little too much still to put them on gracefully, so he doesn't.

"A serial killer's attentions is the last thing I need in my life." He mumbles, excusing himself to leave the kitchen.

Resisting the urge to laugh, to even chuckle, Hannibal holds his smile until Will has left the room, and then he grins down into the work of sliding soap between his fingers and then rinsing his hands clean. It is more like a snarl, a grimace. A threat. He glances back at the flat countertop and makes a silent promise to himself that before this killer even sees Will Graham, he will be given what he wanted, without the delay of proxy.

Hannibal protects what is his.

For now, however, he sets to making dinner. The plumbing in his house is good enough not to bang or creak, but he can smell the steam through the vents as the fan in the bathroom works to pump it out, the scent of soap - even shampoo, which might serve to finally drown the scent of dog that constantly lingers close to Will Graham's skin, but he doubts it.

When Will comes back downstairs, dinner is laid out in the dining room. Served in crocks, a French Onion soup, with a thin layer of bread floated on the top, over which cheese has melted. He is touching the tops up perhaps fussily for a two person, informal affair, with a handheld flambé torch, and whatever is in the oven for desert smells invitingly of cinnamon, warm nutmeg, and perhaps cream.

The water has helped, soothing out the residual tension in Will's muscles. It should feel stranger, walking into Hannibal's kitchen fresh from using his shower, but a cursory glance at the kitchen island has Will clearing his throat to catch Hannibal's attention, and get his own away from the reason he had needed a shower in the first place.

"I shudder to think what you would do to me if I were to refuse dinner now." He says quietly, and it's mostly in jest. It smells divine and the exertion and exhaustion has built up an appetite. He takes a seat and hides a wince behind a quick furrow of brows before his expression clears. Even despite his techniques of retaining the memory, he is unlikely to forget this evening or exercise.

He refuses to think further into how comforting the pressure against his back had been when he'd come to, how he'd missed it when Hannibal had stepped away and let him go. he picks up his spoon and resolves to concentrate on dinner alone until he has to leave.

"I would send it with you," Hannibal suggests mildly. He does not remind that he had driven Will here, and while he would be unlikely to refuse the man a ride back if he asked outright at this moment, he holds some of the power in that it would be a far longer, lonelier walk back to Hannibal's office alone. More economical simply to eat the offered dinner.

But then again, he is holding a torch. He sets it aside, and lifts his eyes at last after Will has seated himself to watch him silently eat, almost joylessly going through the motion.

"Will," he says slowly, finally calling them back. "I don't think you should feed into this man's desires by putting yourself forward as bait."

His spoon severs its way through the layer of cheese, into the soft, soup-soaked bread beneath where he cuts a neat semi-circle like a knife through new skin. "He may react unexpectedly."

Will's eyes flick up and for a moment neither speak at all. He chooses not to point out that he is used to unexpected, that there is no such thing as expected in what he does.

"If he believes his end will come from me, I doubt he'll pose a threat." He says finally. The man seeks one thing only, and Will can give it to him. he wouldn't be stupid enough, reckless enough, to end the one person who can vindicate his entire existence. He mirrors the gentle scoop into the bread and savors his dinner.

Then he asks, because he aches to, because he wants to see, "Do you warn me away because of his desires towards me, or my potential desires towards him?"

Hannibal arches his eyebrows, and leans back. He finds he has not poured wine at the table - distracted, rushed. There is only water, in the smaller clear glasses, the larger are empty. He

satisfies himself with the water as a brief delay.

"I warned you away because I have seen what a personal brush with a serial killer can bring," he answers, recalling Tobias, the wreckage of his study and the weight of the bronze stag crashing down to stave in the man's head. He sighs, and then turns the question. "Are you asking if I would be jealous?"

He would be. Not, perhaps, for the suggested reason. Instead, he lifts himself from the table to remedy the wine situation while Will considers his answer, and when he's leaning low over Will's shoulder to pour, he asks, "Would you like me to be?"

Will allows the question to sit, watches Hannibal leave to retrieve a bottle of wine, no doubt something obscure and painfully expensive, something Will will never try again until he accepts the offer of another dinner. In truth, he has no answer. He doesn't expect Hannibal to be anything but what he is to him, and yet there are moments he catches the man's meditative stare, shuttered as all his looks were but with keen intent behind just barely seeping through.

"I've been informed I need to stabilize before I can allow a relationship into my life," Will says at length, watching the red liquid fill the glass to perhaps a quarter capacity before Hannibal sets the bottle aside.

"I could speak to your psychiatrist on the matter," Hannibal suggests, not without humor, but he retreats to pour his own glass, to settle down on the other side of the table and sip it and then see to his own dinner again.

"I doubt there is much to be jealous of."

"No, I suppose not," Hannibal agrees after a moment. But he won't let another killer near Will, not after he had discovered, upon winding William up and marching him at Tobias, how much he had disliked the thought of his foil - his personal adversary, his own antimatter kept and held in his hands and never quite touching - going after anyone else in person.

They were all catalysts that changed him. Hannibal wanted that right - or at least most of it - as his own. He tells some of the truth. "But I am jealous of what would cause your death. I find very little company I welcome as much as yours."

Will watches him, eyes just below Hannibal's own so he doesn't have to meet them, and considers. Remembers how, during the first meal they shared, Will had declared him uninteresting, how quickly after that he had changed his mind.

It would be the worst sort of error, a fatal one, perhaps, to allow Hannibal further into his life. But despite the way his mind warns against it, Will can't deny that he finds very little company as welcome as Dr. Lecter's.

"Dinner is socially accepted as a precursor to something more," he says instead, taking up his spoon once more to continue his dinner. "Am I to expect something more?"

A precise motion of his tongue over his lower lip, as Hannibal debates arguing the word 'precursor', but in this case he knows it would be in poor taste. What was before was excused,

if Will wanted it to be. What he was proposing now could not be swept aside so easily.

Instead he centers on the meaning of the word 'expect'. "There will be dessert," he says, with a faint laugh. Then he lifts his eyes to make contact, utterly at ease. "The rest is offered, but not expected of you."

Will's decision, as always, will be made without direct duress. What Hannibal means, is that even if he doesn't want there to be more, he won't lose this.

Will lets the words sink in, allows himself to think them through properly, understand the repercussions of acceptance and the consequences of rejection; such offers had expiration dates. He takes up his glass and sips slowly, enjoying the combination of flavors that shouldn’t work together and yet somehow always do.

“Perhaps,” he says at length, setting the glass down but keeping his eyes on his meal as he lifts his spoon, “I will start taking you up on more offers.”

Not tonight. Perhaps not the next time dinner is inevitably offered and Will reluctantly accepts. When his mind is his own to make the choices, unbiased and mostly uninfluenced, then he will stay longer.

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